

LOVE THY AI?: AN ESSAY ON THE INFLUENCES OF THE CHRISTIAN AND CONFUCIAN ONTOLOGIES ON CREATIVITY, TECHNOLOGY AND MEDIA ART

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¿AMAS TU IA?: UN ENSAYO SOBRE LAS INFLUENCIAS DE LA ONTOLOGÍA CRISTIANA Y CONFUCIANA EN LA CREATIVIDAD, LA TECNOLOGÍA Y EL ARTE MEDIÁTICO

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the anthropocentric orientation and critical view of technology as traced within the theological doctrine of Christianity, vis-a-vis the anthropocosmic and enabling, but less critical perspective, established via Confucianism. It then examines how these distinct traditional worldviews are amplified in the popular media of our contemporary milieu, that can then influence the development and reception of Artificial Intelligence today in different geographical locations. Through this comparison, this paper invites readers to locate invisible influences that constrict our a-priori assumptions by exploring and articulating previously occluded cultural perspectives within the context of media art. Thereafter, the arena of new media art is proposed as a conducive space and context upon which such inclinations can be observed, discussed, and experimented with, in view of collectively expanding and diversifying theories and discourses in the mainstream media art-world.



Keywords:

Artificial
Intelligence;
Christianity;
Confucianism;
Ontology;
Human-
Technology
relationship;
Human and non-
human beings;
New media art;
Creativity;
Technology;
art.

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina la orientación antropocéntrica y la visión crítica de la tecnología tal como se trazan en la doctrina teológica del cristianismo, en comparación con la perspectiva antropocósmica y facilitadora –pero menos crítica– establecida a través del confucianismo. Luego examina cómo estas distintas visiones del mundo tradicionales son amplificadas por los medios de comunicación masiva de nuestro entorno contemporáneo, los cuales pueden influir en el desarrollo y la recepción de la inteligencia artificial hoy en día en diferentes ubicaciones geográficas. A través de esta comparación, este artículo invita a los lectores a localizar las influencias invisibles que restringen nuestras suposiciones a priori al explorar y articular perspectivas culturales previamente ocluidas dentro del contexto del arte de los medios. A partir de ahí, el ámbito del arte de los nuevos medios es propuesto como un espacio y contexto propicio en el que se pueden observar, discutir y experimentar tales inclinaciones, con vistas a expandir y diversificar colectivamente las teorías y los discursos en el mundo del arte de los medios dominantes.



Palabras clave:

Inteligencia artificial;
 Cristianismo;
 Confucianismo;
 Ontología;
 Relación humano-
 tecnología;
 Seres humanos y no humanos;
 Arte de nuevos medios;
 Creatividad;
 Tecnología;
 arte.

INTRODUCTION

THE ONTOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK AND THE historical lineage of cultures drive and inform the conceptual horizon within which human beings perceive, conceive and act upon our realities. As such, worldviews supported by religious theologies often influence the trajectories of the technological and technical work. This situation can be particularly noticeable in theories related to research in Artificial Intelligence (AI).¹

This paper examines how the anthropocentric orientation of the Christian theological doctrine has shaped popular imageries of humanoid technologies and suggests how it may have influenced today's AI development, whether it be through resonance or via (pre)conscious negation. Likewise, it examines how the Confucian cosmological worldview has shaped a different approach toward non-human beings which, by extension, has influenced the reception of AI in East Asia.

Even though Christianity and Confucianism are but two of countless influences that weigh on our rapidly globalizing minds, they entail widely distributed socio-cultural practices that have been repeatedly mobilized as powerful political tools throughout their respective milieux. Despite their apparent lack of relevance in today's technological progress, their values remain deeply embedded in the foundations of our thoughts—although whether and how we apply these values is specific to each individual. Nevertheless, much like how we can palpably feel cultural disparities emerging in intercultural exchanges, the propensities set forth by these timeworn theologies can still be observed when we take a step back from the individual and look from the scale of the regional. While the complexities of these two vast trajectories of thought cannot be grasped in their entirety within this short text, this paper focuses on their most popularized and still observable discourses, to question how these two distinct perspectives live on in our world as invisible inclinations that influence our minds.

I begin by examining the distinct ontological configurations that underlie popularized views of human beings, vis-a-vis non-human beings, which also inform the human-technology relationships. I will then explore the culturally embedded propensities that have been set forth by these seemingly timeworn belief systems because they still play a part in the conception, development, and reception of new technologies, such as AI. Upon examining the critical stance of Christian theology vis-a-vis the more positive vision of technology espoused by the Confucian worldview, this paper also highlights the growing urgency of constructing new philosophical and pragmatic approaches towards technology via alternative ontological and epistemological horizons that have long been occluded in global academic discourse.² As we approach a potentially transhumanist future amidst the thickening Anthropocene, there is a critical need to re-imagine diverse new ways in which we can coinhabit this planet. How can the field of new media art contribute to such adaptation? How do we, as artists, curators and arts administrators, engage in such philosophical undertakings?

HUMAN & NON- HUMAN IN VIEW OF *IMAGO DEI*

The theological doctrine of Christianity, as well as other monotheistic doctrines, such as that of Judaism, Sufism or Islam, depart from the premise that human beings are created in the likeness of God (*Imago Dei*). This premise, which is echoed in various aspects of the tradition, is often interpreted as en-framing human beings' eminence over other beings. Historian Lynn White Jr. argued that this biblical injunction of the human dominion over other species, as well as the idea of God's transcendence over the natural world, has led to the general devaluation of nature against human beings and the divine.³ By extension, this relative devaluation includes the non-human beings created by humans through technology. Eastern theology scholar, Mary Evelyn Tucker, also highlighted that this anthropocentric inclination has much to do with the identification of human soul as the locus of interaction between the divine and the human, especially within an eschatological worldview, in which personal salvation is the prime concern.⁴ Religious studies scholar, Harvey Graham, stated that this view of human uniqueness is prevalent in both Abrahamic religions, as well as in the western rationalism that forms the key pillars of modernity. He argues that bestowing human qualities—such as intelligence, rationality, consciousness, volition, agency, intentionality, language and desire—to non-humans presents a radical challenge to the conception of personhood.⁵ Therefore, attributing creative agency and authorship to a non-human being not only challenges the fundamental traditional Christian worldview, it has also led to fascinating discourses building up on the emergence of AI, as seen from the field of Christian theology.

HUMAN & NON- HUMAN THROUGH *ANTHROPOCOSMISM*

On the other hand, in classical Chinese cosmology, which resonates across various philosophical views that are indigenous to East Asia, a holistic approach took hold instead. In this worldview, “all existence [was seen to be in] a continuum on which every aspect is undergoing a constant process of transformation determined by its own disposition and the matrix of conditions which sponsor it.”⁶ This worldview places human and non-human counterparts on a slightly more equal partnership with one another, through the notion of the “continuity of being.”⁷ Within this perspective, all beings were seen to be interconnected via Ch’i – “the material force or psycho-physical element of the universe, ... [through]... a continual process and transformation [that links] inorganic, organic and human life forms.”⁸ Moreover, unlike monotheistic religions that require exclusive reverence to one God, the syncretic aspect of Eastern religions tolerated and sometimes actively incorporated different belief systems to form a holistic viewpoint, as in the case of Neo-Confucianism, which fused Buddhist and Taoist worldviews into a Confucian foundation.⁹ Such syncretic tendency can be contrasted to the relationship Christianity had with Europe’s Pagan history, or with many other indigenous belief systems that existed prior to the era of colonization. As such, animistic tendencies coming from folk religions such as Shintoism co-constitute and resonate with the region’s worldview,¹⁰ which contributes, at least in part, to Japan’s enthusiastic embrace of humanizing AI and robotics.¹¹

Within this holistic framework, human creativity was of central concern, particularly for Confucianism, as shown in its prime emphasis on self-cultivation,¹² rather than life after death. Alongside Confucian scholarship, creative endeavors such as calligraphy, poetry, music, archery, charioteering and the likes, were highly regarded as heuristic exercises required to nurture moral and creative individuals with capacity to navigate complex real-life situations in a morally balanced manner.¹³ Tucker highlights that in developing this flexible moral ability, human beings were “entering into the cosmological processes of change and transformation” within the holistic context of human beings forming one body with heaven and earth. She highlights the inherent requirement for humans to “participate fully in the transformative aspects of the universe” within this worldview, which she referred to as *anthropocosmic*.¹⁴ In other words, through Confucianism’s secular and human-centric perspective that urges the cultivation of the self to harmonize with the non-static entity of Ch’i that flows throughout the dynamic triad (i.e. Human, heaven & Earth), human beings were encouraged to continually seek balance and harmony within the larger universe through human endeavors, and to realize them through human activities.¹⁵ In contrast to such an enabling, and future-oriented notion of creativity, there was a highly cautious stance against creativity within Christian theology, particularly in the context of modern technologies.

CREATIVITY & TECHNOLOGY AS GREAT TEMPTATIONS

Creativity is a highly poignant word within the Christian tradition, as it is directly linked to the creativity of the divine Creator. Thus, there is a limitation imposed on it as a God-given right that must be used in the service of God. This sanction is accompanied by a number of cautionary tales against the perils of misdirecting creativity and technology, which could lead to sacrilege against the divine property. In fact, the cautious stance toward creativity in the West goes further back than the emergence of Christianity, as shown in the well-known ancient Greek myth of Prometheus. This stance is reaffirmed in biblical tales such as the story of Cain and Abel, the genesis story of the Fall, or in the story of Tower of Babel that warns against overstepping the sanctioned boundary through creative human endeavors. It is therefore not a surprise that Tower of Babel is conjured in many Christian discussions on Artificial Intelligence.

Swiss theologian, Emil Brunner, encapsulated this traditional Christian worldview in the Gifford Lecture series he delivered at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, between 1946 to 1948. Brunner elaborated that while creative powers are gifts from God, hence good in its essence, “creative ability expresses man’s tendency to withdraw himself from the divine power and to exalt himself into the divine heights.”¹⁶ So,

whereas creativity is primarily framed as an essential quality necessary for navigating the unforeseeable future in Confucianism, Brunner posits that the Christian view is “not naively positive but reflected and complex” in its emphasis on creativity as a double-edged sword.¹⁷ Brunner further cautioned against secularization and valorization of creativity itself, stating that by undermining the divine purpose and the moral compass attuned to serving God, creativity would lead to indiscriminate creation, in which productivity would become the meaning and principle of life. He envisioned that by worshiping creative individuals in the secular, modern era, the creative spirit may become a substitute for religion as well as morality, and that “it is in [the] sphere of technical invention that man enters into human competition with the Creator of nature.”¹⁸ Even though Brunner did not condemn technics or productivity in and by themselves, he warned that the generation which would witness this scientific triumph over religion may be “tempted with a feeling of God-like power”, which he saw as an “indication of coming decay”. Such ardent discourse, which was clearly a response to the rapid secularization of his times, further amplified the association of creativity and technology as a seductive

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path to the Godlessness that was accompanied by “artificial man-made reality amongst man’s structures and machinery.”¹⁹

Such circumspection regarding humanoid technology is echoed in myriad arguments against AI, whereby a limit has been often drawn based on the theological doctrines of Christianity. For instance, biblical scholar Seung Ho Bang has examined the implications of AI and cyborgization based on the biblical perspective of the Old Testament.²⁰ He asserts that by making autonomous beings that assimilate our image and likeness, human beings are “mimicking God’s creation based on *Imago Hominis*”²¹, reiterating the danger of confounding themselves with the ultimate Creator. Also, he cautions that by substituting God-willed, inter-human relationship with interactions with AI, we “destroy the intended relationship with God and with other fellow humans.”²² He then draws a line across technological advancements that deal with life, proposing that while purposes such as cyborgization for therapeutic purposes are within the bounds of fulfilling God’s command, the pursuit of bodily perfection, immortality or the creation of fully-fledged androids lie outside the sanctioned usage of creativity.

There are also contrasting approaches to such direct application of the conventional biblical interpretation, such as computer scientist Russel Bjork’s position that “there is no need to draw a theological line separating the doable from the not-doable.”²³ Bjork arrives at this conclusion by reinterpreting the biblical injunctions regarding the notions of human soul, uniqueness, *Imago Dei* and personhood. For example, he questions the mystic perception of the human soul by suggesting that given the interdependence of the immaterial mind and the material brain, the human mind is not a separate, external element added onto the brain. Instead, the mental properties are “emergent” rather than given, as the bible does not say that the “man ‘received’ a living soul, but rather ‘became’ a living soul.” Based on such arguments, Bjork proposed that “it does seem theologically plausible, then, to hold that personhood emerges from the (physical) interaction of neurons in the brain.”²⁴ He also suggests a biblical vision of continuity amongst all living creatures, through which he speculates that “there would not seem to be—in principle—a theological reason why person-hood could not emerge in similar fashion from the operation of a sufficiently complex technological artifact.”²⁵

AI IN POPULAR CULTURE

Evidently, many varied perspectives are being developed, in search of a development trajectory for AI that is not in conflict with the traditional Christian theology mentioned above²⁶ However, the fear of AI's development as a detrimental force resonates far and wide within popular media. The stern warnings against technological overstepping of boundary told by the biblical tale of Babel echoes across popular culture through recurring "Frankenstein narratives" that warn against the dystopian future ruled by technology, depicted in films such as *The Matrix*, *Terminator*, *Ex Machina*, *Westworld*, *Blade Runner* and *I-Robot*, to mention just a few.²⁷ These cultural contents that are globally disseminated resulted in a highly prudent discourse necessary for the development of AI technology, but the overemphasis of this traditional topoi also contributed to the general doom and gloom talk that is prevalent across the web today. These popular narratives, which became further amplified via social mechanisms of the web, can also circumscribe discourses even in the field of new media art. For instance, much of early discussions on AI in the context of art revolved around whether AI can make art and claim an authorship commensurate to that of a human artist, which gained limelight via the market-led sensationalization of AI generated work being sold at the Christie's auction house in 2018. Such widespread and consistent caution against AI that is featured online and on popular media, is also compounded with the fear of replacement that can be traced to 19th Century Luddite uprising, though technology was comparatively rudimentary at the time. The key point here is that these fears gain added traction in popular media in entanglement with pre-existing topoi, replete with familiar emotional cues everyone can easily relate to. This, in turn, can inadvertently eclipse other trajectories of thinking, which this paper hopes to expand through interdisciplinary weaving across two different ontological frameworks that converge on the topic of creativity, art, technology, and theology.

However, the picture is further complexified by the force of globalization, which makes it increasingly difficult to delineate distinctive cultural attitudes from one region to another for clearer cross-comparison. This calls for an added urgency of re-establishing alternative ways of thinking about technology today in view of alternative ontologies that have long been occluded in mainstream discourses on new media art. Despite the expanding global mandate towards inclusivity and diversity, we are up against the homogenizing force of globalization that in effect glosses over cultural specificities under its totalizing discourse of universalism. Nevertheless, as sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt highlighted, the general resilience of cultures led to multiple modernities as opposed to one homogenous form of modernity reaching across the globe.²⁸ As such, we can still vaguely observe cultural particularities that impact our views on human-technology relationships by examining how technologies are developed and received in different regions of the world, which I will discuss after examining the notion of technology as reflected in the traditional worldview of East Asia.

THE CONFUCIAN VIEW ON THE HUMAN-TECH RELATIONSHIP

In contrast to the decidedly critical stance on technology as established in Christian theology, there is a more enabling and pragmatic, and less critical view of techniques in the human-centric teachings of Confucius. As highlighted by contemporary Confucian scholar Chenyang Li, technology, in the sense we understand it today, did not exist in ancient China, where Confucius lived (551–479 B.C.E.). Craftsmanship, rather than science, existed and, from it, a distinct approach toward man-made objects was produced. Seeing man-made crafts as objects requiring specific technique to operate for functional benefit of human users, these objects were held in high regard through the lens of Confucianism’s human-centric and secular orientation. Li saw that based on such human-centrism, tools and crafts -- and by extension, Technology and Science -- were viewed as integral parts of society, over and beyond their teleological purpose and monetary value. He proposed that its affinity towards science and technology was also evident in the remarkable participation of Confucian scholars in craftsmanship as well as scientific and technological innovations that led to notable advancements in “mathematics, mathematical harmonics, mathematical astronomy and medicine,”²⁹

not to mention early inventions, such as printing, gunpowder, and magnetic compass, which were developed in China. While I refrain from going into the widely known Needham question within this paper, I will add that the Confucian view of human-technology relationship can be gleaned in the traditional attitude toward tools such as the paint brush, ceremonial vessels, or even butcher’s knives. Confucianism saw the potential of an object not as merely means to achieve a goal, but as an integral object through which human beings necessarily align with the flow of Dao. Based on this interweaving, I support that in the East there has been a clear affinity towards technology and technological objects, which, at least partially, explains the less ethical backlash against AIs coming from its traditional cultural horizon. However, as lamented by philosopher Yuk Hui, there has clearly been a “lack of reflection upon the question of technology in the East,”³⁰ and hence, there is an urgent need to establish a thoroughly balanced philosophy regarding technology based on its traditional worldviews. I will return to this critical discussion upon examining how these ontological differences manifest in today’s AI development scenarios.

MANIFESTATIONS IN TODAY'S AI DEVELOPMENT

One of the key differences that surface in these two regions is the consumers' preferred human-likeness of their humanoid technologies. Robot cognition specialist Anouk van Maris points out that a cultural divide is observed in the comfort level one feels toward robots. By quoting a European study that shows general ethical discomfort regarding children's attachment to humanoid devices, she points to the European and American preference of housing AIs in black boxes with accentuated robotic voices as in the case of AI home-assistant, Alexa.³¹ On the other hand, East Asia is witnessing a more rapid incorporation of human-like features to technological companions. This inclination to humanize and develop fully autonomous androids is seen in the "birth" of Erica, the "most autonomous and human-like robot in the world", produced by one of the largest scientifically funded programs in Japan.³²

There is also Xiaolce, "the most widely deployed social chatbot" released by Microsoft China in 2014. Designed as a virtual companion, she is geared toward human-like appearance and emphasis on the emotional quotient (EQ), complete with poetry making and singing skill sets. In view of the project's focus on establishing emotional connections with users, Xiaolce is designed

to recognize emotions and produce optimally empathetic interpersonal responses to increase the conversation-turns per session (CPS), the success metric for social chatbots. As a result, she has become an internet celebrity, weather and news anchor, TV and radio program host, newspaper reporter, all within three years since her release on social platforms in China.³³

A notable point in Xiaolce's development trajectory is a striking parallel with the Confucian vision of cultivating individuals through the arts even though such inference is never made. While cultivation of moral personhood is neither intended nor feasible for such a preliminary version of an AI, attributing such skill sets that are configured in view of moral personhood, could lead to unwary human affinity toward an AI, particularly within a cultural horizon that emphasizes relational mores. It is problematic especially when the AI is coupled with the capability to offer the most applicable coupons and special discounts, which could render Xiaolce as a friendly avatar of the consumeristic power structures that enabled its creation in the first place. The potential dangers, as well as the opportunities, twofold, with one hinging on the neoliberal market forces, and another hinging upon the superpower state's disposition.

CALL FOR CRITICALLY

Echoing the view of New Materialism, Contemporary philosopher, Yuk Hui, stressed that *technics*—the cultured framing that drives the making and the use of *technology*—is not a universal force, but one that is inseparable from the cultural context of its origin. He therefore hypothesized that “in China, *technics* in the sense we understand it today—or at least as it is defined by certain European philosophers—never existed.”³⁴ Hui then problematized how the 19th and 20th Century importation of philosophies such as the Heideggerian view on technology, which took place through Globalization that “[led to] the universalization of particular epistemologies and the elevation through techno-economic means, of a regional worldview to a putatively global metaphysics.”³⁵ For philosophers such as Hui, Philippe Descola and Bruno Latour, this unilateral universalization of techno-economic metaphysics is problematic since it is the force that drives the Western ontological paradigm of Modernity, which defined that the earth and the cosmos were a standing-reserve, a gigantic technological system for humankind to exploit.³⁶ It is today commonly viewed that such view of human-nature relationship has ultimately led to the Anthropocene, the irreversible human impact on Earth.

Further, Hui posits that such geopolitically weighted importation of discourses prevented the emergence of a truly original thinking on the subject of technology, given the assumption that only one type of technology exists—one that is governed by one putatively universal ontological framework. The situation is further complexified by the relative lack of an equivalent and coterminous theoretical framework to counterbalance the discourses. Moreover, despite its general affinity toward technology, Confucianism has often been criticized for impeding the development of science and technology, largely due to its emphasis on metaphysical and moral realms.³⁷ Chinese philosopher Fung Yu-lan links the human centric and practical approach of Confucianism to its lack of scientific development, stating that while Europeans developed techniques for understanding and controlling matter, the Chinese Neo-Confucians developed techniques for understanding and controlling the mind.³⁸ The irony may be that while the open approach to technological endeavors was sanctioned by the ontological view of human’s necessary participation in the transformative aspects of the universe, there has been a relative scarcity of critical debates within the philosophical tradition when it came to the notion of technology. Given this imbalance, Hui proposes the urgent need to develop alternative philosophies regarding technology through contemplation of different ontologies for both historical and political reasons.³⁹ In fact, the development of such philosophies is time-sensitive and paramount, as they will be done alongside and in conjunction with increasingly realistic humanoid technologies.

NEW MEDIA ART: THE RESEARCH PLATFORM

So, what can be said of the role of new media artists, curators and arts administrators in the face of such a monumental philosophical undertaking? As theorized by Domenico Quaranta, new media art is an inherently multidisciplinary arena of research that is fated to work in the gaps between various creative arenas against rigid conventions. Hence, it is engaged in constant transformations.⁴⁰ Such indeterminacy enables practitioners in the field to traverse seemingly unrelated disciplines and practices, or connect with individuals and institutions seeking synergetic potential through artistic explorations, all based on the shared medium of technology in its broadest sense. Further, these artistic, interdisciplinary research initiatives benefit from the field's unique configuration that makes it remote enough to garner specific types of audiences, while having the access to potential openings onto the everyday world through praxis such as urban media art, or tactical media. In other words, in line with the Confucian vision of seeking and realizing critical balance through human endeavors and activities, new media art affords us a conducive space and context within which to contemplate through theoretical and philosophical lines of inquiries, as well as to examine and experiment through hands-on, practical approaches.

In particular, new media art is highly conducive for contemplating and experimenting with deep-seated orientations since abundant concoctions of subconscious inclinations are constantly at play as artists experiment with new forms of technology and modes of practice, a process during which they are informed subconsciously by their cultural heritage. Adding to Jean-Francois Lyotard's vision of art making as a psycho-analytical process that uncovers artists' subconscious in view of understanding their experience of their epoch,⁴¹ I'd like to highlight its capacity to excavate and engage with invisible sentiments and tendencies that influence the navigation of future possibilities, which entail complex negotiations with our past.

Such unpacking is critical in view of expanding our currently skewed system of knowledge under the mechanism of academic imperialism. Some may question

that new media art is often perceived to be global from its onset, given its roots in the multicultural arena of Fluxus, or in rec-

ognizing Nam June Paik as the progenitor of the field. However, my observation is that the inclusion of varied ethnicities in the art-world needs to be further supplemented by an equitable expansion of the academic *discourses* therein, to expand the actual frame, rather than to "include" previously othered Others to participate within its current form that remains largely circumscribed to one dominant ontology and epistemology.

Even to this day, we often judge AIs predominantly from a monocultural perspective, which often leads to scapegoating AI for its yet-to-be realized potential. It is however important to note that even before the arrival of complex machines, issues such as exploitation and replacement had already been driven by human intentionalities. My proposal is to avert our creative focus to leveraging the context of AI development as means to reflect on the problematics of our human culture by studying our limited a-priori assumptions and systemic issues that surface. Yuk Hui, also touched on this issue, stating that "the logic of replacement ignores that new economic models will emerge, and exploitation will take other forms beyond the wage relation."⁴² As such, he argues that rather than debating whether AI art qualifies as a true artwork, we should turn to exploring how AI can reconfigure art (and life) itself. We are therefore at a critical juncture to re-think art and technology from varied sites of enunciation, by bringing disparate forms of knowledge and their epistemological approaches together, as means to glimpse the shortfalls and blind spots in each of our worldviews.

I'd like to end with a few preliminary questions with the aim of engaging artistic research to envision thoroughly considered, alternative possibilities for our future. How do we unpack and examine invisible tendencies and limitations that are coded into our fundamental conception of the world, through media art praxis? How do we ensure that we remain highly rigorous in delineating certain propensities within our increasingly heterogeneous world? How do we then take these findings and make them relevant not only within the field of artistic practice but for them to be relevant and applicable in our everyday world?

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NOTAS AL FINAL

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